

Forum: ECOSOC

Issue: Measures to increase the standard of living of nations with high birth rates

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Introduction

As much of the developed world - especially countries like Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore - struggle to raise their plummeting birth rates, developing countries around the world face the reverse problem. Differences in fertility and birth rates have long characterised the rift between developing and developed countries. Niger has the world's highest total fertility rate of 7.03, while Singapore has the world's lowest fertility rate of 0.79 (as of 2013 estimates from the CIA World Factbook); accordingly, Singapore has one of the world's highest Human Development Index (HDI)¹ figures of 0.895, while Niger has one of the world's lowest HDI figures of 0.471. This indicates that countries with high birth rates usually suffer from low standards of living.

High birth rates are more prevalent in developing countries for the following reasons:

- Many developing countries are highly dependent on farming for their economy – Sudan, for instance has 80% of its population employed in farming. In such agrarian societies, many people are needed to work on farms. Hence, parents in these societies tend to have larger families.
- Many developing countries have high infant mortality rates, so parents have more children in the expectation that some of their children will die.
- Developing countries often lack robust welfare schemes to take care of the elderly in retirement. As a result, parents want to have more children to take care of them in old age.
- Families in developing countries lack access to family planning facilities and advice.

Unsustainably high birth rates are problematic, as they lead to a host of endemic social problems. These social problems stem from a shortage of resources to sustain the high levels of population. Within a family, having many children causes parents to be unable to afford quality healthcare, education, and nutrition for each of their children. Within a society, overpopulation places great pressure on social infrastructure, such as schools, hospitals, and housing. The result of this is a diminished standard of living, as levels of education and healthcare fall throughout the country.

¹The Human Development Index is a means of 'measuring development by combining indicators of life expectancy, educational attainment and income'. It is measured on a scale from 0 to 1, with larger values indicating a higher level of development. From <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi/>, last accessed 10th June 2013.

Key Terms defined

Standard of living: As defined in the United Nations (UN) Human Development Report, improving the standard of living is “a process of enlarging people’s choices. The most critical of these wide-ranging choices are to live a long and healthy life, to be educated and to have access to resources needed for a decent standard of living. Additional choices include political freedom, guaranteed human rights and personal self-respect”.

Birth rate: The birth rate is the annual number of live births per 1000 population.

Total fertility rate: Closely related with the concept of birth rates is the idea of ‘Total Fertility Rate’ (TFR). TFR is a projection of the total number of children the average women in a nation is expected to have over her lifetime. TFR varies hugely across countries, with highly developed European and Asian nations having a TFR of only 1, while developing countries in Africa may have a TFR of more than 7.

Replacement rate: The replacement rate is the number of children each woman in a nation needs to have to maintain a sustainable and stable population level. In developed countries, the replacement rate is 2.1, while developing countries have a replacement rate of 2.3 - the slight difference in these figures is due to the higher rates of unnatural and premature deaths in developing countries. Nations should strive for their TFR to reach their respective replacement rates in order to achieve zero growth in population.

General overview

Global population is forecasted to increase to 9 billion by 2050, a worrying trend that bears weighty implications. According to the UN Commission on Population and Development, “rapid population growth, fuelled by high fertility, presents a barrier to reducing poverty levels and reaching other internationally agreed development goals”. TFR has been on a downward trend for most countries over the past decades, but current levels in many developing countries are still too high to be sustainable.

As a whole, population growth in Asia, Latin America and the Middle East is tapering off, while many countries in sub-Saharan Africa are still plagued with overly high birth rates. For instance, Ethiopia’s population skyrocketed from five million in 1900 to sixty four million today, and this growth remains unabated - by 2025, Ethiopia’s population is expected to more than double, reaching 145 million.

The rapid and unprecedented rise in population has long been associated with many social problems - which include poorer infant nutrition, lower standards of education, and even a higher risk of infant

mortality in childbirth. Moreover, overpopulation leads to increased competition for scarce resources like land, food and water, fueling tensions and conflict in the region.

At the same time, countries must also be cognizant that high birth rates may not always be a negative social phenomenon. Larger populations imply a larger internal market and workforce, which can boost the economic growth of countries. Hence, countries should be mindful not to enact policies which may severely and irreversibly cut birth rates to levels below the replacement rate.

Major countries involved

Niger: Niger currently has the world's highest birth rate, of 47.60 births per 1000 people. Niger is steeped in poverty, with 60% of the population living below the poverty line. High birth rates are especially pernicious and problematic in Niger, as most of its citizens rely on subsistence farming to earn their income and feed their family - however, growing populations have reduced the average size of arable land each person owns for farming. This inevitably leads to a drop in what was previously already a meagre income, causing standards of living in Niger to fall.

Uganda: Uganda's birth rate, at 45.8, is the third highest in the world. Its current population stands at thirty million, a figure expected to quadruple in a matter of decades. Many Ugandans are culturally attuned to favour larger families, making efforts at cutting birth rates ineffective. However, some government officials consider the high birth rates to be beneficial to Uganda's economic development, and may actually be encouraging higher birth rates. Uganda's President Yoweri Museveni has called the nation's population explosion a 'great resource'.

China: China's is currently the most populous nation in the world, with a population of 1.34 billion. In response to high birth rates in the 1970s - China's TFR was 5.4 in 1971, the Chinese government implemented the one-child policy, a policy aimed at reducing China's birth rate. This policy has proven effective, and China's TFR has dropped to 1.58. This figure is far below the replacement level of 2.1 considered healthy and sustainable, leading to demographic experts commenting that China's economic growth may be impeded by a concomitantly shrinking workforce and growing ageing population.

UN's perspective & major UN bodies

Improving the standard of living globally is a task the UN takes very seriously. The UN charter declares that the UN is committed to "promot[ing] higher standards of living, full employment, and conditions of economic and social progress and development". To achieve this aim, the UN has collaborated with and

established various organisations.

The UN Development Program (UNDP)

The UNDP works towards attaining the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), which includes, inter alia, the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, a reduction in child mortality, and the development of a global partnership for development. The UNDP is the UN's largest provider of grants for sustainable human development worldwide. Annually, the UNDP publishes the Human Development Report, which highlights major developmental issues, monitors progress towards attaining the MDG, and proposes policy solutions to facilitate development and improve the standard of living globally.

The World Bank

The World Bank's primary aim is to reduce poverty and support development, and it does so by providing developmental loans to developing countries. It comprises two institutions: the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) and the International Development Association (IDA), which are managed by 188 member countries. On top of providing financial aid to developing countries, the World Bank also provides policy advice and technical assistance where needed, promoting knowledge sharing globally. Such information often informs the investment and economic decisions of developing countries.

The UN Children's Fund (UNICEF)

UNICEF is the leading UN organisation for the long-term survival, protection and development of children. It has five main areas of focus: child development and survival, basic education and gender equality, HIV/AIDs prevention, child protection, and policy advocacy and partnership. Its main initiatives include providing immunisation to children, promoting primary healthcare and nutrition, as well as advancing levels of basic education.

Timeline of events

27th December, 1945 - World Bank established at the Bretton Woods Conference, along with the International Monetary Fund (IMF)

1946 - UNICEF is founded amidst the throes of WWII, to provide assistance to the victims of the recently concluded world war.

1963 - Global population growth rates reach record levels of 2.2%

1st January 1966 - United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) established to “[advocate] for change”, and to “help people build a better life”

12th March 2012 - World population exceeds 7 billion (as estimated by the United States Census Bureau)

2015 - Deadline for the UN Millenium Development Goals. The goals, among others, include halving extreme poverty and providing universal primary education.

Possible Solutions

More developmental loan packages could be given to developing countries, to provide governments of these countries with the capital to invest in upgrading social infrastructure, to accommodate for a rapidly expanding population. Additionally, knowledge sharing should be facilitated between countries, helping developing countries come up with effective governmental policies. This can be achieved by organising international summits and conferences, or by having exchange programs between countries.

Additionally, introducing greater financial support for families would be a feasible and effective policy. Not only would this allow families to afford a better quality of healthcare, education and nutrition, this would also facilitate economic development as a country by increasing the total level of consumption.

Finally, in order to solve this problem at its root, possible solutions should also focus on controlling the high birth rates. Countries can do so by giving people more access to family planning services and advice.

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[1] The Human Development Index is a means of 'measuring development by combining indicators of life expectancy, educational attainment and income'. It is measured on a scale from 0 to 1, with larger values indicating a higher level of development. From <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics/hdi/>, last accessed 10th June 2013.